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Masterpiece or Racist Trash?

Bridgewater Students Enter the Debate over *Huckleberry Finn*

Barbara Apstein

Despite its status as one of the classic American novels, *Huckleberry Finn* has always been a controversial book. Shortly after it was published in 1885, the Concord, Massachusetts, Public Library Committee decided to exclude Twain's novel from its shelves, dismissing it as "trash...more suited to the slums than to intelligent, respectable people." Warmly approving the library's decision, contemporary newspapers denounced *Huck Finn* as a "trashy and vicious" novel, whose characters and action were of a low moral level. Yet some early readers had words of praise: William Ernest Henley was delighted with the story, with its "adventures of the most surprising and delightful kind imaginable." Another early reviewer, Brander Matthews, admired Twain's technique, especially the "marvelous skill with which the character of Huck is maintained" throughout the novel; we see all the action through the eyes of a 14-year old country boy. Matthews also found *Huckleberry Finn* "fresh and original" and praised Twain's fertility of invention, humor and vividness. He also praised the depiction of Jim, declaring that "the essential simplicity and kindness and generosity of the Southern negro have never been better shown." In fact, the portrayal of Jim was to become a subject of intense controversy a century later. Not one of the late nineteenth century critics mentions the issue that has become most bitterly debated in our own time—the issue of whether or not *Huckleberry Finn* is a racist book.

Although Twain had prefaced his novel with a directive that it not be taken seriously, threatening to banish anyone finding a moral in *Huckleberry Finn*, readers continued to analyze it. In the late 1940's and 1950's two highly influential literary critics, T. S. Eliot and Lionel Trilling, pronounced *Huckleberry Finn* a masterpiece. For Trilling, it was "one of the world's great books

and one of the central documents of American culture." A major component of this greatness, for Trilling, is the moral testing and development Huck undergoes. As they float down the Mississippi River on their raft, sharing adventures and narrow escapes, a bond develops between Huck and Jim. Yet while Huck comes to love and respect Jim, he is occasionally nagged by his "conscience," which tells him that he ought to turn Jim in.

As a slave in the pre Civil War south, Jim is someone's property, and Huck firmly believes that he is

morally obligated to report him. In the famous "crisis of conscience" scene, Huck decides to "do the right thing" and write to Jim's owner, Miss Watson, telling her where she can reclaim her missing slave. Then, reminiscing about their companionship on the raft, remembering Jim's generosity, "how good he always was," Huck changes his mind. Following his "heart," he tears up the letter, implicitly rejecting the moral code he has grown up with. Convinced that he is a hopeless sinner, Huck concludes, "All right, then, I'll go

to hell." This is a wonderfully ironic scene: at the very moment when Huck is fully convinced of his wickedness, the reader knows that his good impulses have prevailed. From this climactic episode, as Trilling observes, the reader takes away a powerful lesson: that what appear to be "the clear dictates of moral reason" may in fact be "merely the engrained customary beliefs of [one's] time and place."

Neither Trilling nor Eliot objected to the portrayal of Jim or to the use of the word "nigger." In fact, Eliot found Huck and Jim to be "equal in dignity" and observed that Jim is "almost as notable a creation as Huck himself."





Left, Huck and Jim find shelter in a cave.

Below, Jim, believing that Huck is dead, thinks he is seeing a ghost.

These illustrations by E.W. Kemble appeared in the first edition of *Huckleberry Finn*.

in public schools, arguing that “tax dollars should not be used to perpetuate a stereotype that has psychologically damaging effects on the self-esteem of African-American children.”

Supporters of *Huckleberry Finn* argue that anyone who reads the book carefully can see that Twain is in fact anti-slavery and anti-racist. Jim is, in fact, the best person in the novel: honest, perceptive and fair-minded,

a loving father and loyal friend. In contrast, the white characters include, among others, Huck’s father, a child-abusing drunkard; the Duke and King, who are frauds and swindlers, and the Grangerfords and Shepherdsons, two feuding clans whose main purpose in life is the murder of as many of their enemies as possible. Thoughtful examination of Twain’s use of the word “nigger” can help teach students the importance of understanding the context in which a word is used. They will discover that, although clearly a derogatory term, “nigger” was not in Twain’s time the powerful taboo word that it is today. Judge Stephen Reinhardt, rejecting a lawsuit by an African-American parent, addressed this issue, writing that “Words can hurt, particularly racist epithets, but a necessary component of any education is learning to think critically about offensive ideas.”

Having been anointed as a masterpiece, *Huckleberry Finn* soon made its way into the classroom. Unlike more linguistically formidable American classics like *The Scarlet Letter* and *Moby-Dick*, Twain’s novel proved accessible to students at all levels. They responded to its humor and to its appeal as an adventure story. Teachers found that they could build on this positive response to draw attention to Twain’s social satire and Huck’s moral development. Entertaining and instructive, *Huck Finn* appeared to be an eminently “teachable” novel.

By the late 1950’s, however, a new kind of criticism began to surface. Black parents and public school officials objected to classroom use of *Huckleberry Finn* on the grounds that the book was insulting and even humiliating to black students. Specifically, they objected to the inflammatory word “nigger,” which appears on almost every page, and to the portrayal of Jim and other black characters. They argued that Jim embodies the stereotype of the “darky”: he is superstitious and gullible, and often appears more child-like than Huck himself. As a result of these protests, some school districts removed *Huckleberry Finn* from required reading lists.

The protests have continued for half a century, and the controversy shows no signs of abating. Last year the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People again filed grievances to remove Twain’s novel from mandatory reading lists



Where do Bridgewater students stand in this debate? My "Writing About Literature" class read *Huckleberry Finn* and examined the controversy surrounding it. The class of 20 included only one black student, Colleen Roberts, who was placed in the potentially uncomfortable position of being spokesperson for her race. The issue surfaced early in our discussions; as the class considered the impact of the word "nigger," a student posed the obvious question: "Shouldn't we ask Colleen what she thinks?" Fortunately, Colleen poised and articulate, gracefully accepted the role which had been thrust upon her. She expressed her own bewilderment at hearing rap musicians and black teenagers use "nigger" among themselves as a synonym for "friend." Was this an effort to take away the power of this historically degrading word? Clearly, although "nigger" may be acceptable for at least some blacks to use among themselves, the word becomes deeply offensive when uttered by a white person.

In their papers about the controversy, the white students in the class concluded that *Huckleberry Finn* does not encourage racist attitudes. "We have to look beyond the word 'nigger,'" they wrote. "This is a literary masterpiece." "In Twain's time, 'nigger' was a synonym for 'slave'." "The language is appropriate to the setting and time." "The portrayal of Jim proves that the racial stereotype of Twain's day was wrong."

Colleen, however, decided otherwise. She enjoyed and appreciated the novel; she saw that Jim was the book's most admirable character. She considered all the arguments. What it finally came down to, however, was that she found the book painful to read. She was angered by the fact that Jim was a mere sidekick to Huck and that "he didn't seem to mind having no vote, no say, during their adventures, in what to do next." She resented his being reduced to a clown, and, in the final chapters, a plaything for the amusement of Huck and Tom Sawyer. She felt disappointed that the relationship between Jim and Huck cannot continue. In addition to reaching a different conclusion from the white students', Colleen's paper was different in tone. For her, this essay was not an academic exercise; it was the outcome of an intellectual quest. "While I cherish my friends who happen to be white," she wrote in her conclusion, "I realize the burning race issues of Huck's day have not gone away; they are just dressed in different clothes. Facing them and not lighting out to another territory is what I must do without bitterness."

One thing all the members of the class could agree on: *Huckleberry Finn* could be a difficult text to teach. As future teachers themselves, they weren't sure they could pull it off. Learning to think critically about offensive ideas, they agreed, is a noble goal, but teachers need to

make careful judgments about which offensive ideas should be presented to classes of teen-agers. They could imagine a tense and emotionally volatile classroom, one that might be difficult to control.

The consensus was that it might be wise to reserve *Huckleberry Finn* for mature high school seniors or college students. In fact, some teachers appear to have reached the same conclusion. Shawn Oakley, a member of our class who had been working with a sixth grade teacher, reported that he had come across 30 copies of *Huckleberry Finn* in a closet at the back of the classroom. The books were covered with dust.

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